

Communion Meditation

John M. Buchanan

Pentecost Sunday

Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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~~One of the reasons we have poets is that most of us~~
~~don't express ourselves very well when it comes to~~
~~difficultly expressing ourselves about~~ life's deepest, holiest,
highest experiences. ^{In} the matters of birth ^{of our children. For in} and or
profound love ^{or} and death, most of us gladly yield to the poet or artist, ~~for~~
~~the most accurate descriptions.~~ By its very nature, religion is
part poetry. Religion presumes to put us in touch with the ground
of being, the creative life force: it presumes to hold up a mirror in
which we can see ourselves as we really are: and it presumes to re-
veal a power by which we may be made bigger and better and more whole
than the image we see in the mirror. Religion deals with the in-
finite, but the tools with which it works are finite: the human mind,
and, ^{and the preacher knows all too well,} the human spirit, human vocabulary. It is no coincidence, therefore,
that religion has been the mother of the arts. The best expressions
of the Gospel of Jesus Christ are not simply books of theology: but
also the music J. S. Bach, the art of Michaelangelo. In a recent book
Harvey Cox ^{in Sec. 1, p. 1} suggests that: there are areas of the human life which are
simply not reducible to technological or even political relevancy... "and then
in chry-
anecdote..."
Religion is an antique settee on the freeway, an almost indecipherable
old song disturbing the bleep of the computers." (The Seduction of the
Spirit, P 327-8)

One of the temptations of religion, particularly among people who
are well educated, well read and consumately logical, is to make its
subject altogether too rational. Our love affair with the scientific
method, our near worship of technology, our faith in computer science

Ⓢ
Betty + J.S. Bach
are going to
make a start
about God's
grandeur + sovereignty
- afterward

④ Religion, of the
 Presby. variety at least - is confined to the mind. Story is told
 of Pentecostals who wandered into proper Presby. worship: Amen - Praise the
Lord! - "Sir is awfully wrong?" No, - I've got the spirit - Well - you didn't
to heal, save, preserve and redeem us spills over, inevitably, into get it here!
our religion. The tempt. to be too rational is
It is, however, a temptation to be resisted. Played
 out to its last measure it becomes a new theology of humanity: mystery
is replaced by intellectual hypothesis: people, not God, become the
subject ~~of a new form of idolatry.~~

The late Thomas Merton, a Trappist Monk, wrote penetratingly about
inherent the mystery of true religion. God, he suggested is not confined by
our ability to comprehend: His activity is not restricted to movements
which can be programmed. In fact, Merton observed, the attempt is not
 only ill-advised, but self-defeating. He wrote: "Whoever seeks to catch
 Him and hold Him loses Him. He is like the wind that blows when it
 pleases. You who love Him must love Him as arriving from where you
 do not know and as going where you do not know." No Man Is An Island,

P 178)

All this by way of preface to intriguing script passage

Seven weeks after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ,
 a small group of believers, in the city of Jerusalem, had an experience
 that was not particularly rational, not at all understandable, but
 altogether overwhelming. Let's try to look at the experience through
 their eyes. They believed in God, the creator of the world, the source
of Life, the author of the law, the ruler of history. In that they were
 not different from most of the people in the world, nor for that matter -
 from something like 97% of the American people at this point in time.
 They had, in addition, known Jesus' teacher, healer, prophet, friend,
 who had died on a cross on the day before Passover. They were convinced
 that he had not remained dead: some claimed to have seen him, spoken
with him, eaten with him. But for seven weeks they had been waiting.
 And I can't help but imagine that what they thought they had by way of

evening believes
 as intellectual
 proposition

a new life was beginning to feel a little tentative.

At the Feast of Pentecost, a religious festival in Jerusalem, attended by pilgrims from all over the world, something new and dramatic transpired. | Peter felt it first, and without warning stood up in the middle of a rather large group of people and began to tell the story - the story of this Jesus who was crucified. | Now that, in itself, was rather remarkable. | Peter was no scholar, no Pharisee, no learned Rabbi: | in fact, he was a rough fisherman, known better for speaking without thinking, usually at the wrong time. | But on this day Peter told his story, so winsomely, in fact, that many believed him and became - on the spot - followers of The Way - soon to be called Christianity.]

We call the day the birthday of the Church and that is what it was. | But just as important it is also the beginning of a Christian sensitivity to a new reality which we call the Holy Spirit. | Christian doctrine, at its best, simply describes human experience. | The experience of Pentecost was all the proof the early church needed that God, known as creator and as father of Jesus Christ was also a potent force in their very midst. | And so the early church framed it in words - The Doctrine of the Trinity. | They used the Latin "persona" - the masks actors wore in Greek drama. | God reveals himself in three ways - not three persons, literally - three masks, three personalities - three roles in the drama: ("Father, Son and this incredible new power in their midst - Holy Spirit.)

The account of what happened, recorded in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, is an example of religion using poetry. | The writer, Luke, drew on two of the most powerful and pregnant images in the old Testament: | fire and wind: | the same fire through which God, in

a burning bush, had confronted an obscure herdsman by the name of Moses:
the same fire, a pillar of which led his people through the darkness of
the Sinai whiderness. | And wind - the breath of God which he first breathed
into humanity: | the vital life-giving energy behind the whole creation.

We have spent for too much time worrying about the phenomenon of
Pentecost, trying to recreate them, or feeling guilty because we can't.
The significance of the event, I would submit, is the result. | One of
the lingering mysteries ^{is} any objective history is the question of
how that little hand of disperited, ill-prepared, Galilean fisherman
managed to start something which would, in a relatively brief period
of time, encompass the whole world. | It is one of those lived-with
facts of life about which we think very little. | Yet it is staggering.
How in the world did it happen? | How did we get from there to here?

The Book of Acts identifies the power by which it happened as the
Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the power of God actively at work within human
experience. | Sixty times Acts uses the term. | But returning to the day
itself, what exactly happened? | What transpired with the people who
were there? | Two things, essentially | the two phenomena it seems to me
we can expect God to continue to produce among us.

First - a heterogeneous group of strangers was made into a new
community of love, joy and hope. | Great experiences do ^{funny things} to strangers
sometimes. | Did you ever attend a magnificent concert which lifted your
spirit, and opened a new ^{window} for you into beauty and brought tears to
your eyes - and then afterward felt a strange sense of kinship and
oneness with the other people with whom you shared the experience?]
That is just a hint of what happened on Pentecost. | People from every
nation were made one, across the natural barriers of geography and race

and social class, and even language. That is the first component. Later St. Paul would write: "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control." (Gal. 5:22) What a surprising thing that early church must have been! What a surprise today, when churches reflect the Spirit and people actually treat one another with kindness, patience, gentleness and love!

The second effect of Pentecost was that this community of strangers suddenly knew what its purpose was. The Spirit gave the church a sense of mission. Does it ever strike you as curious that the contemporary church of Jesus Christ does nothing quite as efficiently and regularly as define its own mission? In the mainline Protestant Church you aren't with it if you haven't done a mission study and written a mission statement and then spent the next twelve months evaluating what you've written in order to begin the project again: while the Pentecostals, who seem at least to know something about the power of the Spirit, are changing the course of history and hundreds of thousands of lives in places like South America.

At the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi, Kenya a statement was made which examined the reasons for church decline in some parts of the world. I found two of the proposed reasons intriguing. We have lost confidence in the God we proclaim and in the power of the Gospel, the report maintained, with a consequent loss of confidence in our mission. We decline when and where we no longer believe in the rightness of what we are doing: when we no longer believe that God is, in fact, in the process of redeeming human history and that we have a part in it. The second reason for church decline, the report suggested, was that we are not experienceing deeply enough

On the day of Pent. - a set of intellectual propitius became the truth for which people would die.

What was the idea in the mind became a

itself? Why the church? - most asked exists, it's dead

That is - we're trying to keep in intellectual - and our minds are only part of us.

the joyful, healing love of God so that we are unable honestly to give an account of the hope within us.

Not long before he died, Karl Barth, one of the theological giants of our generation said that the most important theme for modern theology was the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. I think he would have agreed with the Nairobi report. Christianity, in the mainstream of Western culture has settled in and become very rational, very business-like, very predictable, and, more and more, very boring. I think Barth, in his later years sensed that Christianity had become a matter of intellectual exercise only ~~inquiry~~ for an increasingly smaller number of people, and that because the church feels very little excitement about itself, cannot very well communicate anything persuasive and life-changing to anyone else.

The day of Pentecost, in the long history of the church, is a reminder that God wants to unify his people in order that they may change the world. It is a needed reminder that he is very much in the business of doing that - through his Holy Spirit. I would presume to add that the day of Pentecost is a reminder to this, or any local church, that what God wants most of us is that we experience ^{+ celebrate} together, and share, the goodness of his love: that we realize, together, the joy of being his people. And that we move into our world - corporately and individually - with confidence and hope, knowing that in Christ he has overcome the world. ~~that while there are battles to be fought, the outcome has been decided~~ ^{that we have on our side - the} very power of God.

WT-
out

→ Pentecost is a good time to reflect on that, to open our lives to the life-giving spirit of God. We come, today, to the Lord's table. On Pentecost the Sacrament of Communion becomes a celebration of Christ's presence in our midst: a reminder that he was known to his disciples in

not just in church
but always - every
day -

intimately

the breaking of bread and that he is with us in life ~~as we break bread~~
~~together.~~

In the tradition of the church down across the centuries, red
has been the color symbolizing the Holy Spirit. At the conclusion of
the service this morning we will share the red carnations which adorn
our sanctuary. As you take a fragile, beautiful red flower home with
you today, let it remind you of ~~the~~ ^{you have affirmed in Communion:} oneness with your brothers and
sisters in the church; and as this red beauty spreads throughout our
community, may it symbolize our purpose - our mission - to be God's ^{joyful & hospitable}
Holy People -

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Father, we are grateful for the moving of your spirit in the
Church across the centuries. As we come to your table this morning,
may we be alive to that same spirit in our midst.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

off ~~the~~